A Pause I Didn't Know I Needed

For most of my school life, I believed that the answer to stress was simply to work harder. When I fell behind, I studied longer. If something was hard to understand, I kept trying late into the night. I thought taking a break meant I would fall behind, and falling behind meant I would fail. Because of this, I rarely allowed myself to stop, especially during busy weeks when everything seemed due at once. I felt like if I slowed down even a little, I would mess everything up.

Last year, things became especially overwhelming. I remember having homework in nearly every subject, with tests and projects coming up closely together. After school, I would come home, grab a snack, and sit at my desk for hours. I kept switching between Math, Science, and ELA, never really finishing one before starting another. I thought that studying longer meant I was being responsible, but I just felt stressed and tired all the time. My head felt full, but not in a useful way.

One night, while trying to study from my notes, I realized I had read the same page three times and still could not remember anything. That moment really frustrated me. I was working so hard, yet it felt like nothing was getting into my brain. The more I forced myself to focus, the more nervous and overwhelmed I felt. It felt like my brain was tired, even though I didn't want to admit it.

I talked to my mom about how stressed I was feeling, as I always do. She listened carefully and reminded me that it was okay to take a short break. She suggested stepping back for a moment and seeing how I felt afterward. At first, I didn't like the idea. Even though my mom always supports me, stopping felt wrong. I kept thinking about all the work waiting for me and worried that taking a break meant wasting time.

Eventually, I noticed some change. I started to feel calmer, and my thoughts were not racing as much. My shoulders felt less tense, and I was not as exhausted. That short pause helped me realize how tired I was. I had been pushing myself without allowing my brain to rest.

When I returned to my work, things felt different. I could focus better, and my mind felt clearer. Topics that had confused me earlier began to make sense. I was not just rushing to finish my homework anymore; I understood what I was learning. That surprised me the most. I always believed that working nonstop was the only way to succeed, but that break showed me that slowing down can help.

What really stuck with me was how much pressure I had put on myself without realizing it. I treated school like a race, where stopping meant falling behind. I was constantly worried about keeping up and doing everything perfectly. Taking a step back helped me see that school is not about being the fastest or doing the most work. It is about learning, growing, and improving over time.

This experience completely changed how I think about breaks. Before, I thought you only earned breaks after finishing everything. Now that I see breaks are a part of learning, I realize they give your brain time to reset so you can focus again. Because of this, I stopped comparing myself to others and started paying more attention to my own progress.

That pause mattered because it taught me to listen to myself. School is always going to be challenging, and there will always be busy weeks and stressful moments. But I learned that pushing myself nonstop does not help me do better. When I slow down and take a break, I return feeling calmer and more focused.

Now, when school feels stressful, I remind myself of that moment and my mom's advice. Taking a break does not mean giving up or falling behind. It means taking care of my mind so I can learn better. That experience helped me understand that learning is not just about working hard all the time. It is also about knowing when to pause, trusting yourself, and having supportive people along the way.

- Siddharth Kiran

(South Fayette Middle School)